

“The Russians Are Coming!: A Thoughtful Thanksgiving”

**Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
November 19, 2017**

I mentioned to my wife Chris that I had enough material for three sermons. Her response was: “Good!” “But”, I said, “I should preach only one!”

She laughed at my predicament. I notice a collective “sigh of relief” among you folks!

So you get a discount today: Three for the price of one!

This sermon started writing itself in 1949 or 1950, when I was an impressionable lad of four or five years old.

The odor was pungent whenever we entered the Koptiv’s home. It seemed Mrs. Koptiv always had a pot of goulash cooking on the stove. The Koptivs were “D. P’s”—displaced persons—following World War II, sponsored by my father’s congregation in northeast Ohio.

I realized many years later that it was the Koptivs circumstance which inspired me to become involved with my churches in the resettlement of refugees.

First, in 1976, it was the Tran family, refugees from Vietnam, with whom my family enjoys a very close friendship to this day.

Then, in turn, Cambodians, Afghans, and Poles.

My kids got a real kick one day out of my comical efforts to communicate with a lost, confused woman at a train station—and then I, too, realized that I was trying to help her with my broken Spanish, and she was Polish!

In 1989, I persuaded our church that it had sufficient resources for sponsorship. We organized a strong committee, prepared to welcome an individual or perhaps a couple, secured housing, and awaited a call from the resettlement coordinating office in Illinois. It soon came: “Would you receive a family that has been living for 2 years in a refugee camp, victims of religious persecution in their homeland?”

Of course we would! So I announced to the committee: "The Russians are coming!" The committee asked: How many? I said: Eleven! They said: We have to find a larger apartment! With renewed hope, the Baklashevs departed that refugee camp in Italy, and embarked on a new life in America. I have watched the children grow up, go to college, marry, start their own families, and put down roots across the Midwest!

The history of America is a history of hospitality!

You know by now that the first syllable of my last name is spelled S-T-I-N-E, as opposed to the expected German S-T-E-I-N. I have inherited the family Bible, in which births of my ancestors are inscribed. Beginning with the birth of my grandfather Ralph, names of newborns are recorded with the S-T-I-N-E spelling. Was this an attempt by an immigrant family in the late 1800's to accommodate the language and culture of their adopted country?

Have you been to Ellis Island? Oh...the stories there!

*"Give me you tired, your poor,
your huddled masses yearning to be free.
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me.
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

Emma Lazarus' words (at the base of the Statue of Liberty)

The Russians are coming! SERMON ONE!

102 intrepid adults and children, with a crew of 30, set sail for the New World in 1620. They, too, were escaping prejudice and oppression in search of religious freedom—among the first immigrants to what would come to be known as America.

According to William Bradford: "After long beating at sea they fell with that land which is called Cape Cod...they were not a little joyful." Though by the end of that first, harsh winter, half of them had died.

Those Pilgrims who survived did so by faith in the shepherding God described in the prophecy recorded in the Gospel of Luke: "We would be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all who hate us...that we might serve God without fear."

The welcoming committee for these European separatists? The long-time residents native to the land: The Wampanoag (Eastern Peoples), led by Massanoit. The natives shared with the immigrants their knowledge of crops, environment, and navigation.

The history of America is a history of hospitality!

Little did these natives know that friendly relations would gradually give way to lasting hostilities that would transform virgin forests into battlegrounds and rolling plains into killing fields. Their descendants would become immigrants in their own land.

I have danced around the sacred campfire with the Cherokees of Oklahoma, whose forebears endured the "Trail of Tears".

I have walked the hills above the Little Big Horn River, now silent and solemn testimony to Sitting Bull's determined effort to save his people and their land from the advancement of...immigrants once welcomed!

But back then, the English "coat people" and the coastal Indians sat in harmony together to celebrate the harvest. The occasion symbolized the ever-present potential for harmony among peoples of differing cultures and ethnicities. Of Muslims and Christians. Of citizens of Gaza City and citizens of Jerusalem.

The Pilgrims are coming! SERMON TWO!

To be sure, the challenges of immigration consume our nation nearly 400 years later. By the same token, there remains as always the potential for harmony among peoples of differing cultures and ethnicities.

Globally there are 200,000,000 people migrating as I speak, mostly from the southern hemisphere to the northern hemisphere—from poverty to hope. One of every 35 people. The equivalent of one member of Hyattstown church!

There are economic immigrants, political immigrants, religiously persecuted immigrants, and victims of despicable human trafficking.

Not surprisingly, America receives 80% of the immigrants knocking on the doors of industrialized nations. The history of America IS the history of hospitality, but not without periods of restriction...followed by integration...followed by welcoming again...in cyclical fashion.

We are ALL immigrant people, but, contrary to Massasoit and the Wampanoag clan, those of us who have been here a while sometimes resent the newcomers.

We may even believe the commonly accepted myths:

Immigrants take jobs and opportunity away from Americans.

That's a myth, strongly refuted by the facts.

Immigrants don't pay taxes.

That's a myth, strongly refuted by the facts.

Immigrants don't want to learn English.

That's a myth, strongly refuted by the facts.

Most immigrants cross the border illegally.

That's a myth, strongly refuted by the facts.

To counter the resentment...the ignorance...the fear...what might we do?

We might follow the lead of Jesus, who consorted with Samaritans, the immigrants of his day in an alien land. Christians proclaim a life of faith in the One who showed the way of acceptance, justice, peace, and an unending capacity to love.

What might we do? We might take to heart the conviction of Theodore Roosevelt, presiding during one of America's more hospitable moments: "No people on earth have more cause to be thankful than ours, and this is said reverently, in no spirit of boastfulness in our strength, but with gratitude to the Giver of Good who has blessed us."

The Russians are coming! The Pilgrims are coming!

A thoughtful Thanksgiving!

SERMON THREE!